

A Mini-Met Mashup on the Roof

The New York Times

April 14, 2017 Friday

Late Edition - Final

Copyright 2017 The New York Times Company

Section: Section C; Column 0; Movies, Performing Arts/Weekend Desk; Pg. 17; ART REVIEW

Length: 1086 words

Byline: By JASON FARAGO

Body

Two pitfalls lie in wait for artists who win the prestigious commission to create works for the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The obvious risk is the view, onto Central Park and the skylines of Midtown and the West Side, that can minimize or overshadow the art on display. (Cornelia Parker, the British sculptor who erected a Hitchcockian house facade, fell into that trap last year.) The other, stealthier risk is the museum below. When you are literally standing on top of five millennia of art history, even the most assured artist can be spooked.

I suspect that's what happened to Adrián Villar Rojas, the hyperproductive Argentine who is the youngest artist to exhibit up here since the museum opened its roof garden 30 years ago. Mr. Villar Rojas, 37, is an ambitious sculptor and installation artist, with a sci-fi writer's imagination and an ecologist's anxieties. His best works, often large in scale, appear as future ruins of a posthuman society that has breached its organic limits. For the Met, though, he has shifted gears to remix the museum's own collection, absorbing well-known objects from the galleries downstairs into mashed-up totems and table displays. He's produced a decorous and unexpectedly slight show, with the apocalyptic smudges scrubbed away for summer.

"The Theater of Disappearance," as the rooftop project is called, features seven vertical sculptures, all uniform black, which unite multiple figures -- Met statues in some cases, human models in others -- into bizarre totems. A bearded man in a puffer vest has a Hellenistic statue sitting on one shoulder and a Mesoamerican one on the other, in a museological riff on the old gag of the shoulder-perched angel and devil. A kissing couple stand atop an African lidded vessel; a smiling woman straddles a statue of an Egyptian scribe and holds a bust of Tutankhamen aloft. Instead of the unfired, fossil-like blend of clay and cement the artist usually employs, these toneless statues are of urethane foam coated with licks of matte industrial paint. Less painstaking than Charles Ray's latter-day effigies, less unnerving than Katharina Fritsch's animals and saints, the sculptures here look dismayingly like oversize Disney figurines.

The statues are arrayed amid nine banquet tables, all white, which also have figures seated or lying on them, and which are supported by the kind of tiffany chairs you know from a thousand weddings and bar mitzvahs. (You can't sit down; the tables, chairs and objects on them are all components of the art, designed to the millimeter.) As he often does, the artist has also rejiggered the floor, overlaying the Met's roof and even the bar with white, gray and black tiles.

Nearly 100 objects from the Met's collection, from the Near Eastern and African departments to the arms and armor holdings, have been sucked into this sculptural salmagundi. In a catalog essay, the show's curator, Beatrice Galilee, explains that the works were digitized with photogrammetry software and laser scanners. The artist then resized and reconstituted them, along with the models, into single sculptures that were milled or 3-D printed. Some of these agglutinations have a satisfying outlandishness about them: That smooching pair, for example, are wearing

A Mini-Met Mashup on the Roof

huge masks from the Bamana people of West Africa on their heads. A youth with torn jeans lies on one of the tables, embedded with the form of a woman personifying victory in a 19th-century American war monument. More often, though, the sculptures and banquet tables amount to little more than a collection quiz. Met habitués will clock a few classics -- the full-lipped bust fragment of an Egyptian queen, say, or the recumbent "Mexican Girl Dying," a bit larger than the real thing in the American Wing forecourt -- but they look cut-rate in these circumstances, and the Noh mask large enough to enclose a life-size sleeping woman is too weird for words.

However new the tech, it is a bare and belated project to mash up the art of the past only to remind us that collecting objects from all the world's cultures can be a bit peculiar. The 1970s and '80s witnessed endless museum-critiquing projects, and Modernist collage, too, undertook similar collisions of life and art. Mr. Villar Rojas usually plays for bigger stakes than this and usually does so more disruptively -- converting galleries into tombs or thanatoriums, in which his artworks appear as mysterious leftovers from a last age of humankind. (I'd also have expected more pugnacity given the title of this show, the first in a sequence of projects called "The Theater of Disappearance." That last word is not an idle one in Argentina; the estimated 30,000 citizens abducted and murdered by the military dictatorship of 1976-83 are known as los desaparecidos.)

For both the 2011 Venice Biennale, in which he represented Argentina at just 31, and the 2012 edition of Documenta, Mr. Villar Rojas produced strange and wonderful sculptures, anatomical and industrialized at once, at towering scale; the cracked clay and busted concrete gave them the quality of relics. Later, at MoMA PS1, his gallery-filling concrete staircases served as the public programming agora of the eco-warrior show "Expo 1: New York." In a masterly exhibition two years ago at Marian Goodman, crepuscular galleries whose tiles were embedded with glass shards and iPods led onto an oversize "David," his genitals missing, propped up on blocks like a broken car. Yet Mr. Villar Rojas has impressed at smaller gauges, too. My favorite exhibition of his took place two years ago, at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, where a panoply of little curiosities, from concrete balls to ruptured sneakers, was carefully arrayed on a tall plinth lit from below.

Many of Mr. Villar Rojas's fragile clay and concrete works were destroyed after exhibition, but these new works are here to stay -- though maybe not for as long as the Egyptian vessels or Melanesian house posts he's appropriated. I'll allow that "The Theater of Disappearance" may look quite different later this summer, when the nights get hot, and couples on first dates or raucous groups of friends orbit these banquet tables while necking beers and sipping cocktails at the custom-fitted rooftop bar. But at large scale or small, inside or outdoors, I prefer Mr. Villar Rojas when he shows some grit.

Adrián Villar Rojas: The Theater of Disappearance Through Oct. 29 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-535-7710, metmuseum.org.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/arts/design/a-mini-met-mashup-on-the-museums-roof-with-summer-views.html>

Graphic

PHOTOS: A view of "The Theater of Disappearance," Adrián Villar Rojas's site-specific installation in the roof garden at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The artwork is displayed on and around nine banquet tables. (C17)

Above, in "The Theater of Disappearance" in the Metropolitan Museum's roof garden, a Hellenistic statue and a Mesoamerican one perch, like angel and devil, on the shoulders of a bearded man. Left, a giant tabletop Noh mask conceals the figures of a life-size woman and a cat-size cat. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL KIRBY SMITH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (C18)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: Review

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: ARTISTS & PERFORMERS (91%); SCULPTURE (90%); VISUAL ARTISTS (90%); EXHIBITIONS (78%); HISTORY (78%); VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS (78%); GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE (77%); ART HISTORY (73%); SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE (68%); WRITERS (68%); WEDDINGS & ENGAGEMENTS (62%)

Organization: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART (91%)

Industry: MUSEUMS & GALLERIES (93%); ARTISTS & PERFORMERS (91%); SCULPTURE (90%); VISUAL ARTISTS (90%); EXHIBITIONS (78%); GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE (77%); WRITERS (68%); PAINTS & COATINGS (67%)

Load-Date: April 14, 2017

End of Document